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WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE

A focus on access to elite institutions distracts from more fundamental inequities in HE



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Widening participation is considered a vehicle for improving social mobility. Concern for social mobility has, in practice, meant a narrow focus on fairer entry to elite universities: this has dominated the past decade of policy discourse around access and inequality in higher education (HE).

We need to reflect on how we can situate our research within an alternative politics of access which allows us to ask bigger questions about inequality and HE, and ask whether a focus on elite universities feeding into elite professions actually enables social mobility or simply acts as competitive cream-skimming while ticking the 'access' box. As a sociologist of education

working at an elite university, the urgency of the need to broaden access and make my own institution (Durham University) more inclusive has been put into sharp relief by the stories I've heard from my students. Their experiences of classism, racism and sexism highlight just how hostile elite universities still are. The Office for Students (OfS) has set Durham a target of shifting the ratio of its students who come from neighbourhoods in quintile 5 of the participation of local areas (POLAR) measure to those from quintile 1 neighbourhoods from 10:1 to 3:1 (McKie, 2020). This target poses all sorts of institutional challenges, and would require seismic changes in an elite, and elitist, collegiate university.

These immediate practical questions go to the very heart of debates over what access means and how educational researchers write, research and work. The central tension that I want to highlight here is the unhealthy policy and media obsession with access to elite universities, and how this can obscure the question of inequalities between institutions and types of institution. Earlier generations of scholars also asked these questions. Scholars from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) criticised the narrow focus of postwar sociologists of education on fair access to secondary schooling. Underpinning these

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analyses was not ‘a politics of class but [...] a politics of status’, in which the major concern was with equality of opportunity and greater social mobility (CCCS, 1981: 84–85). Fundamental questions, such as ‘whether there was something problematic about there being [a] working class [...] in the first place’ were not a matter of concern; ‘what kind of society was in fact being reproduced, was not the subject of deep questioning’ (CCCS, 1981: 138).

Access may now concentrate on HE, but the questions posed by the CCCS are fundamentally the same. Contextualised admissions may have been one of the biggest policy wins of a difficult decade for progressive educationalists, but this has occurred in a policy context in which ‘social mobility’ and access to elite institutions and elite jobs has been the dominant policy discourse (Lane, 2015; Rainford, 2017; Ingram & Allen, 2019). Meanwhile, inequalities between institutions and deeper inequalities of class and race are ignored. The OfS (2019) recently described ‘a new approach’ to access with greater emphasis on mature students, but in the time of coronavirus it seems unlikely that this will involve any deeper acknowledgement of the need to challenge institutional inequalities and hierarchies.

The role of educational researchers in this context is not neutral. Many of us are engaged practically in the access activities of our own universities. However, we are also involved in the creation of policy research that can reinforce the narrow obsession with access to elite universities and employers. The Social Mobility Commission (SMC) and the Sutton Trust have been the two principal commissioners of public-facing, policy-oriented research in this area. Multiple reports by both the SMC (2019) and Sutton Trust (2012) have extensively documented unequal access to elite universities and professions. However, the *existence* of institutional hierarchies, with elite institutions serving as the primary conduits into professional employment and positions of power, is not considered a problem. What matters here is whether entry to these circuits of power that move young people from elite universities into powerful and comfortable forms of employment can be made fair.

These reports effectively sidestep the issue of whether elite institutions and the elitism they embody and uphold are sensible ways to organise an educational system. Does it really make sense to concentrate financial resources and cultural prestige on a small group of universities who, despite practitioners’ best efforts, have a terrible record on access? Of course, as a transitional and urgent demand, elite HE institutions should be opened up. But in committing to this in our research and our access activities we must, to paraphrase the CCCS, reflect on what system of HE we are in fact reproducing.

Without attaching access and widening participation to structural transformation and the dismantling of cultures of elitism and institutional hierarchy, it is not clear that there is in fact any radical goal or endpoint. Efforts to change the intake of elite institutions may be transformative for individuals and the institutions themselves, but on their own they do not offer the possibility of systemic change. They fail to ask, or even allow, the fundamental question: Do we actually need elites and elite institutions at all?

Our problem, then, is to respond pragmatically now but also to develop a more transformative and structural approach to the politics of access. We can and should continue to demand wider access, but this must be embedded within a politics that seeks to erode institutional hierarchies of cultural and economic wealth. On a practical level that means pushing for broader conceptions of access that celebrate and value post-1992 universities, further education colleges, other new providers and lifelong learning. Solidarity between institutions, researchers and practitioners is paramount. Doing this requires multiple struggles – over what we research and how, over how we *do* widening participation within our institutions, and over how we build political movements that seek to contest and ultimately transform the unequal terrain of HE. None of this is easy in the current environment, but we have no other choice.

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